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SUBJECT: LEBANON: TASHNAQ MPS DISTANCE SELVES FROM
OPPOSITION, BUT OFFER NO NEW IDEAS

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Ambassador Feltman and Emboff met with Tashnaq Secretary General Hovig Mukhtarian and Members of Parliament

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Hagop Pakradunian and George Kassarji in early January. Tashnaq politicians distanced their party from the rest of the opposition, emphasizing their relative neutrality, marginal participation in the demonstrations, and preparedness for a new dialogue. They expressed concern about the long term decline of the Christian population amidst rising Sunni-Shia tensions, and argued for restoring a strong, neutral presidency to protect the Christians. While Tashnaq had no new ideas to offer, they view all parties as seeking a way out of the political stalemate, and called for trust-building actions and dialogue. End Summary

2. (C) Ambassador Feltman and Emboff met with Tashnaq Secretary General Hovig Mukhtarian and Members of Parliament

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Hagop Pakradunian and George Kassarji in early January to deliver the message that U.S. commitment to Lebanon remains high, bipartisan, and as an independent policy goal not subject to a deal with Syria at Lebanon's expense. The Ambassador also encouraged Tashnaq, as he has encouraged other relatively neutral groups currently in the opposition, to find the new ideas needed from inside Lebanon to break out of the current political stalemate.

RELUCTANT OPPOSITION?

3. (C) Pakradunian seemed to be distancing Tashnaq from the rest of the opposition. He described Tashnaq as in the opposition for the first time in history because it had no choice. Pakradunian blamed Siniora's rudeness more than politics; Tashnaq was told that because it was not with March 14 it did not deserve a seat in the cabinet, even though opponents Hizballah and other March 8 forces were included in the cabinet.

4. (C) Pakradunian went on to emphasize Tashnaq's relative neutrality despite its token participation in the demonstrations. He described the opposition as differentiated, with each group holding its own position.

"There is something wrong with the approaches of both sides," Pakradunian commented. Tashnaq is trying to avoid involvement in the protests, and has not asked opposition leaders what they plan next. The group showed restraint during the demonstration, with one symbolic tent of participants and a single, moderate speech in which Pakradunian did not call for the government to resign and noted that "we are all Lebanese." The media did not welcome moderate speeches, he noted; they are preoccupied with more sensational news.

15. (C) Tashnaq believes March 14 should take advantage of the crisis to restart a dialogue, and in line with its self-portrait as a neutral party, the Tashnaq sees a small role for itself. However its earlier attempts at rapprochement during the national reconciliation dialogue and after the Pierre Gemayel assassination received no reply. Tashnaq relations with other Christian groups and with Jumblatt are good, but its problems with the Hariri bloc remain; even the relatively approachable Prime Minister "forgets" their requests for appointments. Tashnaq currently has no dialogue with the Hariri bloc.

SUNNI-SHIA TENSIONS

16. (C) While the future of the current political stalemate is uncertain, Tashnaq officials expressed greater concern about the long-term decline of the status of Christians in Lebanon.

The Armenians feel that they cannot count on Sunnis, and believe that extremists will supplant Siniora and other moderates. The Ambassador noted that, by attempting to discredit and weaken the moderate Sunnis like Siniora, the pro-Syrian opposition was doing much to create the outcome Pakradunian feared.

17. (C) Pakradunian described Sunni-Shia tensions as playing a positive role in the political stalemate, while also interfering with security. Sunni-Shia tensions are positive

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in that they have prevented the Shia from overrunning the Serail and prevent the Sunni from removing Shia protestors. However sectarian tensions in the military are a concern, as a Tashnaq MP related with a recent anecdote. On the evening of January 3 a sectarian clash broke out when the Internal Security Forces tried to replace the Lebanese Armed Forces in controlling a demonstration of about 300 people outside the Grand Serail. Tashnaq viewed this as evidence of sectarian strife in the military, and asserted that no Christians were involved in the skirmish, in which four ISF members were injured. (Note: Regional Security Office contacts unearthed an unofficial report of a fistfight over jurisdictional issue at the Grand Serail on January 3, but their source denied that the fighting was due to sectarian issues. End Note.)

RESTORING A CHRISTIAN ROLE IN GOVERNMENT

18. (C) Amidst heightened sectarian tension, it is essential to restore the presidency and make the Christians once more feel welcome in the government. The next president will need to be a Maronite who can sacrifice to be a strong leader for the divided Christian community and balance strong Sunni and Shia leaders. Candidates such as Riad Salameh and Roger Edde who represent Lebanon abroad are inappropriate because they cannot represent their community at home.

19. (C) The next president must be from outside both camps, but Aoun may not see yet that he cannot play that role. If he does come to see that impasse he would prefer to back someone close to him, but it is still early and if he speaks out now he may lose popularity he can ill afford. President Lahoud's refusal to approve a parliamentary by-election to replace assassinated Metn MP and Industry Minister Pierre Gemayel is an attempt to prevent a proxy presidential race

against Amine Gemayel and General Aoun.

WAITING QUIETLY FOR A SOLUTION

¶10. (C) Tashnaq leaders once again described their distance from the rest of the opposition and said they do not know what Hizballah will call for next, but all parties are looking for a way out of the situation. Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan is working with Moussa and the Saudis on another round of mediation which involves forming a new government and the tribunal simultaneously, but the general solution is probably not in Lebanon. The Lebanese people are tired of the situation, frustrated with the same impasse in the news each day.

¶11. (C) The problem now is a lack of trust between leaders, not the formation of a tribunal. Aoun has been sincere and frank that he does not oppose the tribunal, and has said that when it comes to parliament the opposition MPs will submit it without change. Trust will also be important in any new cabinet; the Amr Moussa initiative for a 19-10-1 cabinet would require President Lahoud's approval of any decision, or the approval of a Tashnaq MP or Zahle Bloc MP (such as Ily Skaff) as minister. A 19-10-1 cabinet could be viewed as a victory for both sides. Lebanese need dialogue; there was a sense of relief during the national dialogue, but now people are afraid or not free to talk, and are personally afraid of assassination to the extent that they are not leaving their homes.

FELTMAN